

Demystifying Psychotherapy

Helping You Navigate The Process Of Getting Emotional Help!

By Eliot LeBow MSW, LCSW, CDE

This article will help you:

- Understand the difference among various mental health professionals
- Discover what the psychotherapist does, who goes to them for help and the myths about psychotherapy
- Learn what problems can be addressed and how long it will take to address them
- Find out the truth about confidentiality
- Uncover what makes a therapist good and is that therapist appropriate for you
- Discover if your present therapy is working

Bonus Section: Helpful stress reduction techniques

DiabeticTalks™

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Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW), Psychologist, Psychiatrist or Counselor?

Typically people think of psychotherapists as providing psychoanalytic (Freudian) therapy, where you lay on a couch, and the therapist listens to you talk. However, there is a wide range of styles and methods including Psychodynamic, Cognitive Behavioral, Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, and Gestalt Therapy, to name just a few.

It is the similarities that make understanding who to go to for help difficult. Each of the below professions falls in the realm of mental health and depending on their credentials may provide for their clients some amount of or exclusively psychotherapy. It is important to look at the mental health professional's credentials. A large majority of practicing psychotherapists are LCSWs in private practice or a clinic setting.

An LCSW has a master's degree in social work and has at least 3 years of post master's supervised experience practicing psychotherapy. Some LCSWs will receive continued education and certifications in one of the various modalities. Regardless of the genre, if the therapist has an LCSW after their name, then they had supervision for 3 or more years and have passed strict requirements set by the state allowing them to practice psychotherapy independently.

Psychologists tend to specialize in research, teaching, psychological testing, counseling, and some psychotherapy work. People typically meet with them to confirm a psychiatric diagnosis and assess for learning disabilities. A psychologist with the PsyD credential has 3 years of post bachelor education compared to the PhD credential, which has 4 years of post bachelor education in several modalities/settings.

The term "**counselor**" is a general term, and those practicing counseling may not have any training or credentials. In recent years the counseling licensure, Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) has been adopted in all states. The LPC is similar to an LCSW but has some limitations around diagnosis and insurance depending on state regulations.

Anyone can call himself or herself a counselor, but some are licensed, as an LPC. Counselors can have certification, but may not be licensed to practice. For example, addiction counselors only need to be certified as a CASAC, to practice. While a marriage or family counselors may be highly qualified as an LCSW with additional training as a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist (LMFT).

Most counselors, depending on training, may use behavioral techniques with more direct advice giving. Most psychotherapy styles and techniques avoid giving direct advice, allowing the clients individuality to be the driving force behind the course of treatment. Before seeing a counselor or anyone for therapy make sure they are licensed to practice by the state.

A **psychiatrist** is a physician with a medical degree with four years of residency/training in hospital settings. Psychiatrists have some training in psychotherapy, but their main focus is the physical brain. They assess, diagnosis and prescribe medication that help balance brain chemistry, to reduce their patients' symptoms. It is important to note that if you are seeing a psychiatrist for medications, it will serve you well to work with a psychotherapist, instead of the person who is prescribing your medication.

Psychotherapists

The role of a psychotherapist can be different depending on the type of psychotherapy. Different genres of therapy use different techniques and methods to bring about healthy change. The therapist's role is to facilitate this change. Although the techniques may be different, therapists can help the clients see things in their lives with greater insight and clarity, while the client learns new ways to cope with negative events or feelings. The psychotherapist's job is to create a safe environment, where client-therapist relationship builds and over time allows the client to talk about and process difficult feelings. During this process, the psychotherapist listens without bias and gives feedback to help the client grow and resolve difficult issues in their lives.

Crazy people?

No, not crazy! Psychotherapists help everyday people who are facing a variety of different problem in life. Not everyone who goes to psychotherapy has a major mental disorder. Some individual use it to reduce anxiety and stress. Some attend therapy to deal with various life issues, like difficulties at work, relationship problems, needing help to deal with loss or chronic illness.

Some symptoms that bring people to a psychotherapist can be difficulty concentrating, memory problems, struggling with motivation or enthusiasm for things that would normally excite you, feeling overwhelmed most of the time or in specific situations, or maybe you are shying away from social interaction and isolating from friends and family.

Some people go because they feel they are not fulfilled with their life or unsatisfied with their relationships and want to improve it. Others may come to improve communication skills, increase organization skills, goal setting, to deal with negative self-talk, manage their stress, deal with recent or past trauma, to practice self-care or improve social skills.

Psychotherapy is for anyone who wants to improve themselves and their life.

Myths Or Misconception Of Psychotherapy

Therapy is for people who have major issues? False, someone may come because they need to figure out why they keep getting passed over for promotions at work or something similar. Some people continue to go to therapy after their problem is resolved to address day-to-day issues, talking with a non-bias individual trained to help you grow: it is cathartic, reduces ones stress, continue personal growth and process difficult choices.

People who go to therapy are weak or crazy? Not true, admitting you need help, then seeking help and following through by going, takes bravery and strength. That talking is a waste of time, after all "it wont help me find a job or fix my boss." Self-growth is never a waist of time and people tend to find new ways to approach and address all issue.

Are therapists just glorified chair leaders? Most therapists are not, if the client needs some positive affirmation then the therapist might give encouragement and support. Most of the times the therapist tends to be empathic but uses techniques that might emotionally challenge the client.

Therapy is common sense. But is it? Common sense is generalized to everyone, where a therapist provides wisdom and insight that is individualized to the client. Unfortunately it is not common sense but if it were, life would go a lot smoother.

A friend or family member can provide the same support. Not true. The relationship with a trained professional in dealing with problems is one sided. Friends tend to share stories back and forth. A lot of times the friend may not be listening to you or giving you advice that worked for them but may not work for you. Your friend might end up talking to someone else about your issue causing additional complications for you. Where the Client-Therapist relationship is private; the focus is on your needs. You can talk uncensored because you don't have to worry about what the therapist thinks of you or that you will say something that might hurt the therapist. When with a friend you may feel the need to be careful about what you say.

Signs That You May Need Psychotherapy

- You have an internal or external problem that is causing significant distress in your life.
- The problem is negatively impacting any area of your life: work, home or social life.
- You feel sad, depressed, anxious, stressed out, lethargic or hopeless but you have done nothing or what you have done to relive these negative feelings in your life doesn't help.
- You have stopped using your coping skills, like running, yoga, hobbies or other things that in the past have made you happy.
- Social support, talking to friends or reading self-help books no longer help.
- People you talk to like friends and family for support are tired of listening to you. They may start avoiding you, no longer responding to texts, emails or messages you leave on their phone. They may directly tell you that you are stressing them out.
- You start abusing something or someone to alleviate your negative feelings: For example you start or increases the use of substances like alcohol and drugs to avoid or self-medicate, you start spending all your free time online, watching pornography or other process addictions like gambling. You find, you are lashing out at friends, family or the store clerk. Turning your anger towards people who have nothing to do with how you feel.
- It may seem obvious but people in your life start approaching you about your behavior or how you seem down a lot. They may even be suggesting that you go see someone for help and are generally overly concerned. If there wasn't a problem they would not be overly concerned. So, go and check it out. Maybe they are seeing something you are not.
- You may feel stuck in your life or generally unhappy or unsatisfied. Nothing seems to ever get better and life has become a drag. You may have unexpected aches and pains that are symptoms of prolonged exposure to stress.

Children

Yes, there are psychotherapists that specialize in work with children use play therapy. Extensive training is needed to practice play therapy so make sure their credentials are in order.

Traditionally play therapy can start as early as three years old up to 12 years old.

Finding A Good Therapist

In my professional opinion, a good psychotherapist tends to be client centered; individualizing treatment to the clients needs. They are respectful of you and your views while empathizing with what you are going through. He or she is a good listener while giving helpful non-bias

feedback, allowing you to discover what will work best for you. At the end of the day it is the one you feel most comfortable working with.

It is difficult finding the one that would be right for you as everyone has different needs and one therapist can't be every thing to everybody. In the beginning you may want to schedule several intakes and sample the different psychotherapist. Some people get referrals from friends but just because your friend connected with their therapist they may not be a good fit for you. If you are starting from scratch and you don't require a specific specialty, then you could see what psychotherapists is part of your insurance plan. If your plan has out-of-network benefits or you are paying out of pocket, you can go online and search "psychotherapist and the issue you want to work on." For example, if you have diabetes and it is causing problems for you enter "psychotherapist diabetes" into your search window or Google. There are also various websites like Psychology Today where you will find a page with the psychotherapist's information needed to help make your decision. Remember that it is very important that you feel comfortable with your therapist and if something doesn't feel right then, it may not be the right fit for you.

Is it working?

Realistically, psychotherapy can take time, so being patient is important in the beginning. After a few sessions, you should feel more hopeful, understood, and have a sense that you are heading in the right direction. Not all session will bring about great insight, but as insight into your past and present self grows, you should start seeing and understanding where your suffering originates. This will help you make more informed decisions, but will also stir up bad feeling.

Sometimes you will leave the therapist upset or mad not necessarily because of the therapist per se but because therapy is working. Greater insight and understanding may bring up painful feelings and experiences from your past. Overtime, you will develop a deeper awareness of yourself and you will discover the reasons for your suffering. Through your new insight and understanding, your therapist will help you process these reasons to reduce or resolve you suffering.

If you feel that you are not progressing, address it with your psychotherapist. Good psychotherapists will respond empathically, address your concerns and investigate whether psychotherapy is working for you. If they feel you are not progressing then they should refer you to someone they feel will work best with you.

What Psychotherapists Help With

Therapists help people reduce drama in their life, while increasing emotional wellbeing. There are many areas that psychotherapists can help with, problems ranging from home, work or even play. They help with managing physical and emotional issues of chronic illness. Therapy can help people manage mild to extreme emotional issues that impact their ability to function or just their ability to be happy. People address temporary or chronic issues like: depression, anger, sadness, motivation, isolation, stress, anxiety and many other emotional matters.

Short-term problems like loss of a job, a marriage, a friend, a family member, relationships and other losses that trigger emotional reactions can be addressed and processed. Other problems may include areas of abusive while at work, during a relationship or by a family member.

Psychotherapists can help with internal issues like: negative self-talk, obsessive thinking, bothersome thoughts or problematic emotions. They can also help people deal or manage stressful situations, burnout, or overcome lifelong issues from childhood. Addiction and various chronic illnesses can also be addressed in therapy.

Some Psychotherapists do not have a specialty, while others have very specific specialties with additional training. Some areas of focus include: trauma, depression, chronic illnesses, and many others. A more specific example that I practice is called Diabetes-Focused Psychotherapy. It specializes in helping families, couples and individuals with diabetes using a holistic approach, combining traditional talk therapy with diabetes education and diabetes management support. It addresses both the physical and emotional aspects of living life with diabetes while still addressing other non-diabetes related life problems.

Confidentiality

The HIPAA law requires all patient material to be confidential with some exceptions. If you say during session that you are going to hurt yourself or someone else then the therapist by law has to notify the appropriate authorities. If the therapist believes that someone is abusing a child or a senior citizen they are mandated reporters and are required to call the Department of Social and Health Services.

A psychotherapist from time to time may need to discuss your case with another health professional bound by the same rules of confidentiality. Licensed Psychotherapist under HIPAA need to make every effort to avoid revealing the identity of their patients. In some situations a patient may request the therapist disclose certain information and will be asked to fill out a release of information form that states what and to whom this information will be released too.

If the client is a minor younger than age 13, both parents have access to Clinical Record, including Psychotherapy Notes, unless there is a court order prohibiting one of the parents from access.

Helpful Techniques To Reduce Stress

First, let's get the obvious out of the way; talking with a psychotherapist can reduce stress. Many things can be causing your stress, and it is important to resolve the underlying issue while doing stress reduction activities.

When you feel anxious, take five deep breaths and continue as needed. If you hear yourself saying "what if" statements around the unknown, remind yourself that fear of the unknown tends to be scarier than the reality if "What if" comes true. "What if" statements create undue worry and anxiety. Avoid procrastinating. Don't avoid problems, as they will only get worse and increase your stress levels.

Eat three meals a day and avoid fast food. The healthier you eat, the lower your stress levels. Exercise 3-4 times weekly with at least 30 minutes of cardio per workout session. (Great for reducing stress)

Various sports activities reduce stress, including, Bike riding, ice skating, walking, running, hiking, tennis, racket ball, ping pong, swimming, golfing, baseball, football or soccer.

Hobbies are helpful in reducing stress, everything from stamp collecting to building model airplanes. Watching funny movies, going out to the movies, listening to calming music or reading a good book, help many people relax.

Alternative techniques include: massages, acupuncture, meditation, yoga, Tai chi, taking a warm bath, scented oils, bath salts, scented candles, natural or artificial sun light.

**All advice included in this article is therapeutic in nature and should not be considered medical advice.*

Eliot LeBow, LCSW, CDE, is a Diabetes-Focused Psychotherapist, Presenter, and Author. His private practice is in New York City and is also available via Skype. LeBow, who has been living with Type I Diabetes since 1977, treats the many diverse cognitive, behavioral, and emotional needs of people living with Type I and Type II Diabetes.

Diabetes-Focused Psychotherapy takes a holistic approach combining traditional talk therapy with diabetes education and management help. It addresses both the physical and emotional aspects of living life with diabetes while still addressing other non-diabetes related life problems to create a unique holistic approach to help people with diabetes thrive. *For more information go to his [website](#) or [Facebook Page](#) or [set up a free 30-minute phone consultation](#) to see if talk therapy is right for you.*